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ABSTRACT

To function fully in a global society, individuals must be able to meet people different from themselves in an open atmosphere, free from the bias of long held stereotypes. From the earliest days at school, teachers and schools can decisively influence children's attitudes toward their own and other groups. It is important to understand that stereotypes constitute the foundation of biased beliefs. Stereotypes strongly affect people's behavior because they are learned at a very early age. They tend to persist in adults despite experiential evidence to the contrary. In young children, stereotypes are strong but they are also in transition and can be changed. To begin to eliminate bias, teachers must reassess the cultural environment they present to the children in their care. Steps to changing stereotypes include teachers' awareness of their own attitudes, monitoring of their own behavior, evaluating the classroom and school environment, modeling non-stereotyping behavior, and setting an example by being sensitive to and genuinely caring for others. Four pages of references complete the document. (RH)

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No More Bias: Teaching Children to See the World Without Limits

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No More Bias: Teaching Children to See the World Without Limits

Futurists are predicting a move toward a global economy, suggesting that economic trends imply social changes as well (Naisbitt, 1982). With that change in perspective, there is also a shift to consideration of a true global society, one that emphasizes the connectedness and interdependence of people and cultures.

To function fully in a global society, individuals must be able to meet other people different from themselves in an open atmosphere, free of the bias that comes from long held stereotypes. Although bias is most often not a conscious decision, the cost of even unconscious bias is extremely high, both in lowered expectations and in the limiting effects of a narrowed perspective. Starting as early as the first school experience, schools and teachers can be an important element for teaching children to respect and value both their own group, whether defined by culture, ethnicity, sex, age or class, and other groups as well, or they can instead foster a belief in the superiority of one group over another. Understanding the nature of stereotypes as the foundation of biased beliefs is important to truly understanding the possibilities open for change.

How Stereotypes are Formed

The issue is a complex one. The roots of bias lie deep within the nature of human beings, in a tendency to hold stereotyped beliefs about groups of people who are different from the self. A stereotype is, by definition, "a set of beliefs about the personal attributes of a group of people" (Ashmore & del Boca, 1979, p. 222). In and of itself, a stereotype is not bad. These beliefs about a group's attributes are generally used in our minds to organize the people we meet into workable categories so that we can cognitively deal with the differences we see. In that respect they serve a useful function. The problem is that most stereotypes are limiting and define differing groups of people into a hierarchy of valuing. An even deeper problem arises when one acts as if the stereotype were, indeed, fact (Garcia, 1984). Stereotypes, then, are used to explain the social relationships between differing groups of people (Ashmore & del Boca) and, even more costly, to justify the differing positions of people in relationship to each other. This is when a stereotype becomes a bias.

The strength that stereotypes have in affecting people's behavior lies in the fact that they are learned

at a very early age. Research and theory suggest that very young children naturally see people in terms of stereotypes because it is cognitively a way of structuring the world so that it can be understood (Kohlberg, 1966). Unfortunately, learned so early, most stereotypes are not questioned but simple accepted as truth.

An example of the early appearance of stereotypes can be found in the sex-role literature. Sex-role stereotypes, i.e., beliefs about male and female behavior, are already strong as early as two and three years of age (Kuhn, Nash & Brucken, 1978). Preschool children regularly describe the differences in men and women in terms of power, nurturance, competence and strength (Kohlberg). Very young children operate on strong stereotyped beliefs because of the usefulness of those beliefs in categorizing and understanding all parts of the world. Sex-role is therefore not the only category open to stereotyping by young children, as early stereotypes are apparent in situations involving ethnicity and class as well.

White children as early as four years old have been shown to have internalized racial attitudes and feelings of superiority with a corollary of devaluing in black

children (Goodman, 1964. See Goodman for a review of the research prior to 1964.) In a study of school age children, negative racial attitudes were already prevalent in white first graders (Singh & Yancey, 1974). Stereotyping and cultural valuing is not limited to one culture alone. The universality of this tendency to stereotype and personally value the group given higher cultural value is indicated by a study in India demonstrating racial and ethnic prejudice as early as four (Khalique, Jabbi, & Chatterjee, 1984).

There are other areas of stereotyping that are not often considered. One is beliefs about the elderly. Boys as early as first grade voice a reluctance to associate with the elderly (Filmer, 1982). Negative perceptions of the elderly carry over to high school students who see the elderly as losing competence with age (Crew, 1984). A second is belief about an individual based solely on his appearance. Research has shown a consistent bias for individuals seen as attractive. Even the attractiveness of a person's name will affect others' perceptions of competence. (Erwin & Calev, 1984).

Stereotypes are tenacious. They tend to persist in adults despite evidence to the contrary. Research in

Minnesota on beliefs about integration found that the majority of people responding to a questionaire believed blacks to be physically inferior despite the number of very successful black athletes in the area (Hilliard, 1980).

If stereotypes begin so early, how are they learned? Sometimes the learning is direct, from racist or sexist comments. More often than overt behavior, attitudes are learned through subtle and mostly unconscious communications on the part of parents, peers and teachers (Morland, 1962). Nor are they necessarily the result of negative contacts. In many areas of this country, a white child can still grow up with little or no contact with children of any other ethnic group. Yet these same children show definite stereotypes and negative beliefs about minorities. These beliefs are reflections of the general culture and its values.

Vygotsky (1978) best explains how the culture as a whole shapes the attitudes of the children growing up in that culture. Concepts of people and social values are formed first on the social level, as a reflection of the culture, and then on the personal level, <u>inside</u> the child. The internalization of the culture is an inner process that takes time to develop. In young children

stereotypes are strong but they are also in transition and can be changed. The stereotypes found in four year olds in the study by Khaligue, Jabbi and Chatterjee (1984) described earlier were not fully stable until age fifteen.

Influence of the school setting

The schools themselves are both part of the problem and part of the solution. In research on classroom interactions, teachers have been shown to discriminate in favor of white, male, and middle class students (Brophy & Good, 1974; Entwhistle & Webster, 1974; Rist, 1970; Safilios-Rothschild, 1979). One study found in interviews that teachers were more likely to talk negatively about black children in their classes than white children. The first such study was conducted in the 60's in segregated schools (Leacock, 1969). A replication of this study in the 80's in desegregated schools with both black and white teachers found the same results (Washington, 1982). That is, both black and white teachers described black children by more negative terms when compared to their descriptions of white children.

The preference for males apparent in so many studies also demonstrates a contradiction in behavior.

Teachers were found to talk more to boys than to girls and to interact more with boys in general than with girls. They help boys solve problems but give girls the answers (Serbin & O'Leary, 1975). Teachers also expect boys to give them more trouble (O'Reilly & Borman, 1984) and discipline boys more harshly (Kaminski & Sheridan, 1984). Intellectually, the bias is for males; socially and behaviorally, for females.

The cost of bias is high. Minorities are much more likely to be recommended for special education placement (Prieto & Stanley, 1981; Argulewicz & Sanchez, 1983) and as hyperkinetic and discipline problems (Stevens, 1981).

Diminishing the Effects of Bias

The schools have been shown to make a difference, both in children's attitudes towards each other and in the teacher's use of unconscious bias. Singh & Yancey's (1974) intensive program to change racial attitudes in first graders had a significant effect after only thirty days. Vygotsky (1978) explains that when the cultural environment changes, concepts will also change. Change takes place through cognitive conflict. This conflict occurs when presenting children with data that demonstrate a valuing of diversity in age, sex, race and

class as opposed to the stereotypes they already hold. Schools cannot avoid transmitting values and attitudes, many of which are transmitted through the hidden curriculum (Suzuki, 1982). The question revolves around what values are going to be transmitted. To begin to eliminate bias, teachers must begin by looking at the cultural environment they present to the children in their care.

Steps to Changing the Stereotypes

Step 1: Awareness

First, there needs to be an awareness and valuing on the part of each teacher and caregiver of their own ethnicity and/or cultural heritage. A true awareness of the contributions made to the larger culture by whatever sub-cultural group a person is a member of will make it more possible to value another's ethnicity. This is particularly important for minority teachers to avoid the tragedy of bias against their own ethnic group.

Second, there needs to be an awareness within every teacher of their own attitudes and prejudices, particularly about children of varying ethnic groups and those of less than middle class. If a teacher believes,

even unconsciously, that a particular group of children is not as capable as another, then behavior toward the children will reflect this belief.

Third, there needs to be an awareness on the part of the individual teacher and the school as a whole of the depth of the problem and the potential costs to their particular students.

Step 2: Monitoring your own behavior

This one can be difficult for many teachers to do for themselves. Most teacher attitude that reflects bias is so subtle as to be hard to identify. When teachers in one study were asked about their own behavior they did not appear to differentiate in their discipline by sex nor did they report any difference in their expectations by sex. In the same classrooms the students' perceptions of teacher behavior reported differential treatment in expectations for intelligence, good behavior, and positive and negative treatment (Kaminski & Sheridan, 1984). It is the unconscious nature of stereotyped beliefs and behavior that make them hard to identify.

Some questions each teacher can ask that will look at regularly reported behavior are: Do you discipline boys differently from girls (most do)? Do you verbally

reward children for stereotyped behavior? Do you "talk down" to a non-English speaking child (or one who speaks a non-standard English) or treat that child as if lacking in intelligence (for research, see Wasser, 1980)?

Step 3: Evaluating the classroom and school environment

This step requires a careful look at both the individual classroom and the overall school, particularly at wall displays and books available to the students, to determine exactly what messages are being delivered. One issue concerning public displays is the meaning of multicultural. Seldom do wall displays in schools include anyone other than black and white subjects. If other minorities are a part of the school's population, then those in particular should be included. It may take more effort on the school's part to find better examples to be models for all children as pre-packaged materials will seldom address the problem, but the reward is well worth the extra effort.

The issue for books is much the same as for displays. Books should show all types of people, including all ages of people, actively participating at every level of life.

Step 4: Model non-stereotyping behavior

Once the previous steps have been completed, this is easier than it may sound. There are several things

that can actively demonstrate to the children a commitment to a non-biased environment.

1. Include minority achievement as part of the day-to-day curriculum. The community can be included by inviting parents, civic leaders, grandparents, and local celebrities, both white and minority, to talk to the students. Multicultural education should be a way of life, not a week's special or a topic reserved for one part of the day. Community volunteers should include the elderly and the handicapped so that children can see them as equals.

2. Encourage all children to participate fully and to strive for their own excellence. An example of the importance of consciously encouraging full participation can be seen in the comparatively recent addition of computers to the early childhood classroom. The group most likely to be found choosing to use the computers in the majority of classrooms will be white males. It has too often been said that the world will soon consist of two groups - those who know how to use computers and those who do not. Encouraging others who hesitate to use the computers may require effort to get them beyond their own uncertainties. The extra effort pays high dividends if the result is students who expand

their opportunities by gaining familiarity and early expertise in what is rapidly becoming an essential skill.

Step 5: Understanding the importance of individuals

Step 5 may well be the most important, for without it everything else may be attempted half-heartedly. Know at all times that the sensitivity, understanding, and genuine caring that each teacher shows to each student, no matter what sex, ethnic group, or social class, may, in the final analysis, be the most important influence of all.

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